

**by
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Suggestions for Coaching Winning Humorous Interpretations

Humorous Interpretation is perhaps the most difficult event to coach. Unlike policy, Lincoln-Douglas, oratory, and extemp, there are fewer set expectations. Judges just want to be entertained. In this article I want to suggest techniques that you and your students can use to create a winning humorous interpretation from the selection of the literature, to the blocking and polishing that creates a tournament winner.

Finding a Winning Piece

A winning humorous interpretation needs to be novel. The newness starts with the literature. The play for NCFL

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contest and NFL contest (which also allows prose) needs to be something that the judges have not seen before. Fresh doesn't preclude older literature. Fresh does suggest something that has not been done by every interper from the NFL district in South Florida to the NFL district in Hawaii.

There are multiple sources of literature that are relatively untapped in the interscholastic community. My first suggestion is to go to New York. Before you start looking for a plane ticket, consider ways you can bring New York to your students through the television and the library. The Tony Awards need to be assigned viewing for your interpretation students. You can also go to the nearest university library and look up a Yearbook of the Tony nominated plays for each year. This will provide you with a list of scripts to obtain. Scripts for the current season are usually difficult to obtain, but if you have the patience you can write some of the theaters for this material. Make sure that you try to obtain the winners and the nominees.

My second suggestion is to get a list of Oscar nominees and winners. There are rules against using film scripts in competition; however, you will find that there are older films that started as plays.

My third suggestion is playwrighting contests and fes-

tivals. Some playwrighting contests and festivals often publish their winners. The addresses and contacts for these contests can be found in the Dramatist's Sourcebook. One festival that publishes and markets their nominees each year is the Actor's Theater of Louisville's contest. The plays from that year are published in their entirety. My fourth suggestion is local playwrights. Consulting a professor at the nearest university Drama Department may lead you to scripts that have recently been published. My fifth suggestion is not so new, but the approach is novel, your students need to get list of authors and titles that their competitors are using. Repeating someone else's piece is not novel. The novelty with this suggestion comes in with cross referencing the author's name in a library's database to see if there are new pieces by that author or pieces you and your students do not recall seeing in competition. Using these suggestions is the start to increasing the body of literature performed in interpretation and helping your students earn that first place rank.

Cutting a Playwright's Baby to Make it Your Own

Once your student has found a piece that he or she is comfortable with the student has to cut the literature. This process starts with the student reading the entire play. The cutting has to reflect an understanding of the literature and the only way for the student to do this is to read the selection. You might want to have the student discuss the play with you to reflect their understanding. The next step is to have the student highlight sections of the text which he or she finds funny. You need to empower the student at this part of the process by letting him or her do the highlighting. Though he or she may miss parts that you will find hysterical, your student has to present the material in front of judges and their peers. You can discuss the omission of some of this material the student has overlooked, but I caution you from forcing the student to perform material they just don't find funny. The student then needs to cut these parts from a photocopy and glue them onto blank pages. Don't worry about order, just get the material down on paper. The raw material now needs to be molded into a cutting. A cutting needs to go through the steps in the basic story diagram: exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, and resolution. The cutting, just like the full piece, needs to be driven by conflict. The

conflict needs to have many levels along the way. A piece that runs too smoothly toward the climax may seem flat to judges. The diagram of the cutting needs to have multiple levels of conflict happening.

The final step in the cutting is selecting the material for your teaser. The teaser is essentially the movie trailer for the attraction yet to come. It needs to introduce the principle characters and foreshadow the driving conflict of the piece. The material is usually literature that is not included in the body of the piece. However, if the student feels that there is an image or argument that needs reinforcement, you both may elect to use some of the material to repeat the information.

Introducing This Monster to the World

A step that most students neglect to do at this point is to write the introduction down. Don't let your students put this off until you are driving to your season opener. Write it early on so you don't have to worry about that thirty seconds to a minute of the performance. You want to achieve four goals in the introduction. The theme or message of the piece needs to be considered first. Though some might think that theme is not important in Humorous Interpretation, the student must show an understanding of the literature. A clear articulation of the theme helps the student accomplish this goal. The principle characters need to be addressed. The judge will hear the teaser first and may not remember the names of the characters that are unfamiliar to the ear. Redundancy can be your student's friend at this moment because the judge will want to be able to refer to the characters' names. The judge also needs to be familiar with the plot of the play. The judge doesn't need to get a Cliff Notes summary of the literature, just enough to show where the cutting fits into the play or prose. The author and title of the selection need to come last. The student needs to start memorizing this introduction once it is written down. The delivery needs to sound natural. This is the student's chance for the judge to see who he or she is aside from the characters.

Blocking from the Body Up

Your student has in hand everything that will be performed, now it is time to get them up on their feet and building the piece. Interpretation is different from Thespian contest because you have one actor who has to perform the multiple characters. I have my students start with their feet. The student needs to come up with a distinct way of holding the feet and ankles for each character. The student then needs to isolate the knees, hips, spine, shoulders, neck, head, shoulders, elbows, and wrists. This master stance is complimented by the master facial expression. The student needs to consider the face as an instrument. The positioning of the forehead, brows, eyelids, nose, cheeks, mouth, and chin will allow for the creation of a distinct face. You and the student need to decide on a locus for the character as well. The locus in the piece is where the character looks. In order to help your student keep all of these characters straight, you might want to have them pop from character to character as you call out the names. The order of characters needs to be random. You are checking to make sure that the student has the physicality for the characters down.

There are two schools of thought on the placement of loci. Some feel that the loci need to be placed on a grid which resembles a stage diagram (lower left, lower center, lower right, left, center,

right, upper left, upper center, and upper right. The gaze of the character indicates how the character's inter-relate. A shorter character is logically going to look up at a taller character and visa versa. Once you have mapped out using this grid, you can tape up sheets of paper and have the students practice delivering lines to these sheets. There are others who feel that a grid is too binding. The distinctions of characters needs to be hyper clear so that the judge will know which character is in front of the audience.

Voices from the High School Student

Now that the characters have distinct looks, now, and they will also need distinct sounds. Building a voice comes from the manipulation of the vocal tone and pitch. In order to get students to know pitch, have the student deliver one of the character lines from the cutting in their own voice. Then get the student to repeat the sound using lower and higher pitches. The student needs to think about the combination of the nose and mouth to deliver the right tones. This depends on the amount of air released through each. Some mouth sounds can be produced with the adjustment of the tongue and the positioning of the lips. Nasal sounds need to come from the higher or lower points. Rate can be fast or slow. Some characters have distinctly loud volumes or soft volumes. Beware, most rounds occur in high school classrooms or college lecture halls, so the adjustment of volume needs to take into consideration how these sounds will play to the judges ear. Students should be able to feel where the master voice for a character comes from within their own instrument.

Be careful of overly throaty sounds. Though a student might be able to produce the sound or voice for one round, if the voice gets through prelims into out rounds, the student's voice may be eliminated before the student is out of the running for the championship.

Ya Gotta Have Gimmicks

The steps above will help the student find, cut, and block a piece. However, one essential thing is missing that will help the performance be funny for the audience, a gimmick. Student and teacher need to work on incorporating gimmicks into the performance. A gimmick is essentially a visual bit that is funny. The student might roll his or her neck and eyes, for example. You might also want to have the student "mug" for the audience. You and the student need to think about as many opportunities that a gimmick might help the selection. These gimmicks should come from the literature and the student's understanding of the literature.

When adding in gimmicks you have to consider two aesthetic schools of thought.

During my time on the circuit as competitor, judge, and coach, I have seen some judges who prefer HI's to be fantastic and extraordinary. There are other coaches who want the humor to come from normal characters that are saying things that just happen to be funny. You and your student will need to consult on what the climate is in your district.

Conclusion

Preparation for a Humorous Interpretation varies for different students. In my experience, getting started as early as possible gives you both a chance to work on the piece. Realize that the
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finding, cutting, and blocking is going to take time. Rehearsing the piece needs to become a daily activity for the student. The student needs to perform the piece every day.

The tournament needs to feel like yet another practice with one key difference: performing a Humorous Interpretation is a chance to share something very personal. You as a pedagogue need to emphasize to the student that the win or the loss is not important, your student is getting a chance to share his or her art with peers.

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